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SUBJECT: NGO Partnership Case Begins, Families and Observers
Denied Entry

¶1. (SBU) On July 28, the criminal trial against four young people associated with the NGO Partnerstvo (Partnership) began in Minsk's Tsentralny district. Belarusian authorities accused Timofei

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Dranchuk, Aleksandr Shalaiko, Nikolai Astreiko, and Enira Bronitskaya of operating an illegal organization that "encroaches on people's rights" under Part 2 of the Criminal Code's Article ¶193. Partnership became prominent and respected for its impartiality during its observation of Belarus' parliamentary elections and referendum in the fall of 2004. The organization was gearing up for observing the March 19 presidential elections when the four leaders were arrested. If convicted, the court could sentence the four activists up to three years in prison.

¶2. (SBU) Authorities have held the four youths in the KGB's pretrial detention center since February 21. During the run up to March's presidential elections, BKGB Chairman Stepan Sukhorenko publicly accused the unregistered organization Partnership of involvement in a violent coup plot and claimed the BKGB had seized from Partnership offices fraudulent reports alleging BKGB efforts to rig exit polls.

¶3. (SBU) International observers, including OSCE, EU, and U.S. Embassy representatives, gathered outside the courthouse to seek entry to the trial. The lawyer for the four activists, Vera Stremkovskaya, confirmed to Poloff that despite her best efforts, Tsentralny court authorities will not permit the family members of

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the accused or international observers to enter the courthouse. One of the OSCE representatives noted that according to her sources indicated that the GOB allegedly closed the proceedings for "witness protection." The German ambassador assured Stremkovskaya and independent journalists outside the court building that the EU delegation had sent a diplomatic note to the Belarusian MFA to request permission to observe the proceedings but had received no reply. [Note: Post also sent in a diplomatic note requesting access, but the MFA American Affairs Department Head told Charge on July 27 that the MFA will not get involved in internal legal matters.] The EU diplomats presented a copy of the diplomatic note to court officers but the judge refused entry without comment. The OSCE Acting Head of Mission also called the Belarusian Supreme Court requesting access to the trial, but to no avail. The German ambassador told Poloff that he plans to inform the Finnish

presidency of the GOB's refusal and to send a letter of protest to the Chief of the Belarusian Supreme Court. After 40 minutes, the EU delegation and OSCE representatives left the area.

14. Poloff spoke with the relatives of Dranchuk and Shalaiko, who expressed their gratitude for attempting to observe the trial. Poloff also observed several opposition leaders in front of the courthouse, including: former opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoly Lebedko, and UCP Deputy Chair Lyudmila Gryaznova. Milinkevich told journalists that the Partnership trial is entirely political and that the freedom of Belarus is on trial. Lebedko and Gryaznova commented to Poloff that Lukashenko pressured the judge to close the proceedings.

PHLIPOT